

Trinity Church,
Fishkill, Dutchess County,
New York.

HABS No. 4-201

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

District No. 4
Southern New York State

Historic American Buildings Survey
Wm. Dewey Foster, District Officer,
25 West 45th Street, New York City.

TRINITY CHURCH
East Main Street, Fishkill, Dutchess Co., N.Y.

Date and Early History

A memorial tablet, the gift of James E. Dean, Esq., of Fishkill, was placed over the door of this church in 1894, presenting the following chronology of the parish: "Trinity Church organized, in communion with the Church of England, by the Rev. Samuel Seabury, 1756. The first rector, Rev. John Beardsley, Oct. 26, 1766. Reincorporated, Oct. 13, 1785, and Oct. 16, 1796. This building was erected about 1769. Occupied by the New York Provincial Convention which re-moved from White plains, Sept. 3, 1776. Used for a military hospital by the army of Gen. Washington until disbanded June 2, 1783. Pro Deo et Patria 1756-1894".

On the day the tablet was unveiled, Nov. 29, 1894, an address was delivered by the Rector, the Rev. Horatio O. Ladd, M.A., which was printed the following year with the title The Founding of the Episcopal Church in Dutchess County, New York. He explains the circumstances that made this the first Anglican Catholic Church established in that county. He describes the village as it appeared in 1755 when the first English missionary, a circuit-rider, came to Fishkill. He mentions the principal homesteads and other landmarks, including "the old stone Dutch Reformed Church, which had been built 24 years before, in 1731." Fishkill was then a little hamlet "of 13 or 14 dwellings only, besides a church, a tavern and a school house."

He reveals the clergyman on horseback as the Rev. Samuel Seabury, M.A.,--a name again made famous in our day in the political arena in New York. The visiting missionary came on invitation of the church warden (appointed by the Governor under the Vestry Act of 1683),

and by the desire of other residents of the town, to organize the parish. The Rev. Mr. Ladd presents a good biography of the Rev. Mr. Seabury, and quotes from a scarce pamphlet published by him in 1759 containing considerable information about the people and affairs of the town thus early in the church's history. The Rev. Mr. Seabury returned to his parish in Hempstead after a week's stay in Fishkill, and came again in 1757, 1759 and 1761. This Mr. Seabury was the father of the Right Rev. Samuel Seabury, D.D., of Connecticut, the first Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States.

Building the Church

"This ancient edifice," Mr. Ladd says, "stands to-day [1894] substantially as it originally was built, with only its towering four-decked spire and weather-cock removed from its exterior...."

"With the subscription for its erection, which was started as early as 1756, we date the organization of the Church as a spiritual body; for the experimental visit of Mr. Seabury had developed the purpose to build a church and establish worship."

In his visit in 1759 Mr. Seabury wrote that he found here that "the conditions of the Government," then engaged in the war with France, had prevented them from fulfilling their pledges to build a church.

A copy of the deed given by Matthew Brett to James Duncan and Richard Southard, trustees, for the lot on which Trinity Church stands, containing a half acre and 31 perches of land, is dated Sept. 30, 1767. This deed was not recorded until Aug. 10, 1775. It brings, however, the last probable clue known as to the approximate time when this building was erected. "Without doubt," says Ladd, "some time elapsed, after the securing of the land, for settling the competition of the Poughkeepsie churchmen as to the right of collecting the subscriptions

made and locating the first church building. It was therefore probably not built before 1769, nine years after the date (1760) hitherto claimed for it."

In 1776, although the Rev. John Beardsley was nominally serving as rector, the church building had fallen into a condition that rendered it unfit for use. The tablet over the door of the church, quoted at the beginning of this review, says that the building was "occupied by the Provincial Convention." That is not completely true. On June 30, 1776, the Provincial Congress met for the last time in New York City, and adjourned to meet in White Plains, July 2d. After the Declaration of Independence, it changed its name to the Convention of Representatives of the State of New York. On August 1, a committee was appointed to draw up and report a Constitution. The success of the British in the Battle of Long Island, however, made it expedient for the Convention to retire farther northward, and it was resolved to meet on September 3 in Trinity Church, Fishkill.

The entry made in the official records of that early legislative body before the constitution of the State was adopted is that the Convention met "in the Episcopal church at Fishkill" on Sept. 5, 1775; but the first item in the Minutes under that date is: "This church being very foul with the dung of doves and fowls, without any benches, seats or other conveniences whatever, which renders it unfit for the use of this Convention. Therefore they unanimously agreed to adjourn to the Dutch church in this village, and adjourned to the same accordingly. The Convention met at the Dutch church at Fish Kill pursuant to the above adjournment." (Journals of the Provincial Congress, Provincial Convention, Committee of Safety and Council of Safety of the State of New York, printed at Albany, 1842, Vol. I, p. 609.)

Neither Mr. Ladd nor other writers on Fishkill's local history have heretofore quoted in full this extract from the Minutes of the Convention when they have mentioned the Fishkill session; nor have they attempted to explain how the church edifice could have fallen into that deplorable condition so early in the War while the rector was still there. It is very possible the building was not entirely finished in 1776, and that the congregation had used improvised benches or none.

The session of the Convention in Fishkill is referred to in the history and description which accompany the drawings of the Dutch Church, which is also included in the present Survey.

The Rev. Mr. Ladd gives an interesting biographical account of the first rector, Beardsley, who was also rector of Christ Church, Poughkeepsie. Both churches were built under his ministry. He depicts the trying position of ministers of the Church of England during the American Revolution. This rector was loyal to the King.

Ladd also very well describes the political importance of Fishkill during those critical years. This building was used as a hospital, although rejected by the State's first legislative body. After the War, in 1783, nearly 350 pounds were allowed by the government appraisers for such occupancy during the seven years of the War. This payment was used by the Vestry in making repairs and in completing the structure.

The tall steeple, which was in three sections and only three feet lower than that of the neighboring old Dutch church, was removed in 1803.

The tower remained but was reshaped in 1860. (See Ladd's history, p. 26.)

Later alterations on the interior of the church are thus described by Mr. Ladd in the same address: "The removal of the old fashioned, high-backed, square built pews which, with the rest of the interior were painted white, and also the hour-glass pulpit and sounding-board, of which the crowning piece is before you, the cutting down of the bases of the pillars, the reseating of the church in its present form out of the material of the original pews, the rebuilding of the chancel and vestry room, the replacing of this, the second altar, by the present one, were done between 1860 and 1870,...to which should be added the erection of the memorial window in the chancel..., and the memorial gifts in the chancel and upon the altar."

In a sermon delivered on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the church on Sept. 14, 1906, the rector appealed for "the means to rebuild the tower, install a set of tubular chimes, and erect a tablet in the vestibule commemorating the history of the edifice." (12th. Ann. Report, Am. Scenic & Hist. Preservation Soc., 1907, p. 50.)

This plain little wooden church with its siding painted red, its trim white, and surrounded by its old graveyard, is seen today near the center of the village of Fishkill, on the south side of the Main Street, about a block east of the Albany Post Road.

The exterior has not been altered since it was built except for the removal of the large square tower, and the addition of a new chimney and a small Vestry Room at the rear. An old print appearing in the Fishkill Weekly Times, Feb. 17, 1886, shows the vestibule walls as carried up to form a truncated tower with a balustrade around its flat roof.

A unique feature of the exterior is the wood-covered cornice which flares out from the top of the walls. Another unusual feature of the

plan is the outside entrance to the auditorium, located in the middle of the East wall.

The interior has been considerably changed. The pointed arches and recesses at the chancel end are all later additions, as are also the tall round columns in the aisles. (From observations by Mr. Dewey Foster, Director Eastern New York State Division, H.A.B.S.)

Written, May 23, 1934, by

Thomas W. Hotchkiss

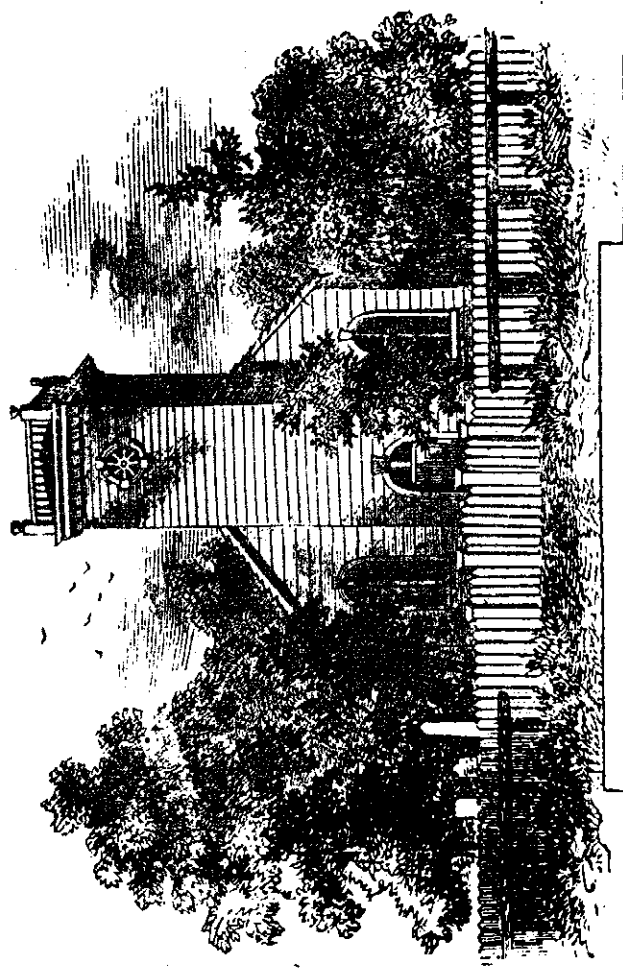
Thomas W. Hotchkiss
118 Pine Street, Peekskill, N.Y.

Approved:

Mr. Dewey Foster

ADDITIONAL APPENDIX.

OLD TRINITY CHURCH, FISHKILL, N. Y., AS IT FORMERLY
APPEARED.



[From the Fishkill Weekly Times, of Feb. 17, 1886.]

Trinity Church, Fishkill, is one of the oldest church edifices in the State and still remains in the family, and of New York. It was the third church built upon a spot owned by the family.

Historic American Buildings Survey.